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ABSTRACT

A Chinese student of English is often faced with culturally based differences in denotation and connotation, idioms and proverbs, habits, and formulaic use of language. Since the native speaker of any language has built into his language repertoire his unique cultural assumptions and values, a culture-oriented curriculum in language teaching is preferable. English lexicographers should develop a dictionary for nonnative speakers that would provide adequate cultural information for each word, such as related symbolism and customs. In addition, students' cultural exposure should be an integral part of the language curriculum, particularly in the third year. The teacher should act as a catalyst in this cultural awareness process, helping students maintain a distance from both the Chinese and English cultures. (MSE)

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CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Any language is a part of a culture and any culture is a part of a language; the two are closely and intricately related. In foreign-language teaching and learning, two languages and, indeed, two cultures come into contact; the teaching of English as a foreign language, therefore, can never be made effective without the teaching of culture.

Throughout my years of teaching, I have discovered that cross-cultural differences, which give rise to misconception, are many-sided. A Chinese student of English is often faced with the following problems arising solely from what is often termed 'background knowledge':

1. In English there are quite a lot of words whose denotations are completely new to a Chinese student of English. As a matter of fact, the things these words denote do not exist in Chinese culture at all. Such words often leave him in a haze though he may find the Chinese meaning from an English-Chinese dictionary. One example would suffice: Hamburger is not served in a typical Chinese restaurant and therefore even the definition in the dictionary ("a flat circular cake of very small pieces of meat") does not really help much: The student can understand the explanation literally, but he is still all at sea as to how a hamburger is made, what it tastes like and when Americans eat it; the best he could do would be to remember the definition by rote without any perceptual knowledge of the food. This, needless to say, would prove to be a handicap in his learning.

As native speakers of English and Chinese learners of English have different beliefs, customs, life-styles and behaviours--different cultures in short--they often find the naming of things quite alien to each other.

Chinese learners of English are often puzzled over such terms as hippies, yippies and 'me' generation, etc., while a native speaker of English would certainly frown on the word-for-word translations of some of the Chinese terms such as barefoot doctor (chijiaoyisheng: a type of doctor working in China's rural areas who is not paid by the state but by the local production team), propaganda team (xuanchuandui: a mobile arts-performing team that gives free performances with a moral message). The differences in the naming of things as such result from nothing but cultural differences.

2. When the denotation of a word is the same in both cultures, there may still be a problem, for the connotation of a word is also culturally-based. Sometimes, the connotation of an English word covers a much larger area than its Chinese equivalent, which has only a very limited connotative meaning. The word authorities is a case point. A native speaker of English may say 'the authorities of the government' or 'the authorities of the school' without attaching any pejorative sense to the word, but its Chinese equivalent dangju is usually used as a derogatory word. A Chinese student of English would naturally refer to his 'government authorities' as 'government leaders'; he would address his 'school authorities' whom he favours as 'school leaders' or 'head (leadership) of the school'. And influenced by his traditional Chinese concept, he would naturally regard the English word authorities as having only a pejorative connotation. The converse may be said of the word indoctrinate. According to Chinese culture, there is nothing wrong with indoctrinating someone with an idea, while in English culture the word does carry a pejorative sense and a very strong one at that. Hence, in order not to cause any misunderstanding on the part of the English reader, we sometimes avoid using the word indoctrinate even if the occasion demands it; instead, we use the word imbue, for instance.

Sometimes, the conotation of an English word is entirely different from that of its Chinese counterpart. This, again, poses a problem on the part of the

Chinese student, whose deep-rooted oriental culture often restricts the comprehension of what he reads. Any Chinese learner of English can translate the sentence 'He is a wolf' into Chinese. But when asked about the implied meaning, he would most probably associate the word wolf with 'ferocity' or 'fury' or 'aggressiveness', for that is just the kind of image a wolf suggests according to Chinese culture; he would fail to see that in the above sentence, the word wolf is figuratively associated with a man who tries to charm women for his pleasure, which is what the sentence actually means in English. Set against the Chinese cultural background, no one, no matter how imaginative he might be, would refer to such a man as a lang (wolf). In China, we have a high-quality battery called 'baixiang' (white elephant), and it does bear the trade mark WHITE ELEPHANT when it is exported to Britain. Just imagine the effect of the English translation upon the minds of the British customers! However, the Chinese producers of this type of battery are innocently sure that their products would be anything but useless and costly. This may be a coincidence, but it does show to us that it is highly necessary for us language teachers and learners to be cross-culturally sensitive in the right manner.

In short, the connotation of a word can never be fully understood without a sympathetic understanding of the cultural patterns of the target country. Failure to see this would sometimes lead our career of teaching to a blind alley.

3. In English, there are numerous idioms and proverbs that originated from Greek mythology, biblical allusions and historical events. They constitute a menacing hurdle to Chinese learners of English, for they know little, if anything at all, about their origins. Consequently, they find it difficult to conjure up the images that such idioms are intended. Take for example the simile as cool as a cucumber, a cliche in the English language: Chinese learners of English would wonder why cool should be compared with cucumber; after all there are other things that are much cooler than a cucumber. So, though this simile has almost

become a trite phrase in English, Chinese learners of English might still find it hard to appreciate the freshness of this idiom!

The Chinese language is also rich in idioms and proverbs. It does happen that an English idiom or proverb can find a happy equivalent in Chinese, but the chances are rare. In nine out of ten cases, such equivalents are culturally-loaded and, therefore, have a difference in meaning, which many Chinese learners of English tend to disregard. As a result, a Chinese learner of English may think that One's hair stands on end is a happy equivalent of the Chinese 'nufachongguan', but it is not true, for the Chinese 'nufachongguan' mainly suggests 'anger', whereas the English saying indicates 'fear' or 'terror'; similarly, the Chinese idiom 'wangyangbulao' does not really mean the same thing as the English to lock the stable door after the horse is stolen, for the Chinese idiom implies that it is not too late to take precautions even when harm has been done, whereas the English idiom means just the opposite. Such examples bear out the truth that the acquisition of a foreign language is also the acquisition of a foreign culture.

4. The whole question of cross-cultural differences is by no means confined to lexis. It also involves textual analyses. Utterances produced in particular situations would not be fully understood unless the cultural background itself was provided. A little dialogue about sitting at a meal I once taught tends like this:

A: Is that salt over there?
B: (Stands up and passes the salt over to B) Here you are.
A: Thanks.

After learning the dialogue, one of the students, too much grammar-conscious perhaps, came up to me and said in a matter-of-fact manner: 'This dialogue is not logically composed. Since A asks B a general question, B should begin his answer by a "yes" or "no". The student failed to see that what A says is a question

in form but a mild request in meaning. Such a comic occurrence tells us that in some respects the learning of a foreign language really involves acculturation.

It is interesting to note that we can find 'the phatic use of language' in both English and Chinese. This phatic use of language is also culturally-loaded. When a Chinese meets his friend, he often says, 'Where are you going?' or 'Have you eaten?' depending on the time of the day just as a kind of greeting. Suppose he applied such phatic use of language on an American friend, wouldn't it be funny and annoying? Likewise, a Chinese learner of English would consider it rather pointless for two English men to start their conversation by talking about the weather!

Since the native speaker of any language has built into his language repertoire his unique cultural assumptions and values, I hold that a culture-oriented program in language teaching is more desirable. In this connection, I would like to propose:

(a) Lexicographers either in the U.S.A. or in Britain should make an extensive and deep-going study of the teaching of English as a foreign language in every corner of the world and try to compile the kind of dictionary that non-native speakers of English would find most useful in their learning. This new-type of dictionary should provide adequate cultural information about a certain word. For example, under the entry of each of the colour words (red, green, white etc.), the compiler should state what the colour is symbolic of according to traditional English culture, and if a word is closely related to a traditional English custom, write a note of it under the entry. As for those things that are unique in the English-speaking countries, the compiler should illustrate them with pictures. Since the majority of non-native speakers of English do not and cannot have a chance to live and study in Britain or the U.S.A., the need for a well-compiled dictionary is growing more and more acute. We do regard a culture-oriented dictionary as our 'everyday teacher'.

b. In designing the syllabus for a four-year language-learning program, we must see to it that due consideration is given to the student's cultural development. It is true that not every learner will find a cross-cultural experience to be totally positive, yet, the teacher can and should play a therapeutic role in helping the student acquire a balanced and unbiased understanding of the differences between two cultures. My own experience has shown that as far as the mastery of English is concerned, a successful Chinese student of English is one who sees himself as maintaining an equal distance between both cultures.

Here, I would like to present the syllabus that is being implemented in the English Department of my college, and any criticism and comments from my colleagues are welcome:

First Year	Reading (Intensive) Reading (Extensive) Listening Practical English Phonetics
Second Year	Reading (Intensive) Reading (Extensive) Listening & Speaking Practical English Grammar Composition
Third Year	Reading (Intensive & Extensive) Listening & Speaking Introduction to the U.S.A. and Britain Composition (advanced) Literature (both English and American) Introduction to the English Language (phonology, syntax, lexicology,

Fourth Year	rhetoric and stylistics, history of the English language)
	Translation
	A Brief Survey of Modern Linguistics